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Shelby Baptist employees and county officials celebrate the opening of the hospital's new psychiatric unit on Jan. 9. (Reporter Photo/Neal Wagner)

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New psychiatric unit will help law enforcement, families

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By **NEAL WAGNER / Managing Editor**

ALABASTER – For Shelby County Probate Judge Jim Fuhrmeister, who oversees the county’s Mental Health Court, the Jan. 9 opening of Shelby Baptist Medical Center’s new psychiatric unit was much more than just a ribbon cutting.

“This is huge. I don’t think people realize how big this is,” Fuhrmeister said during an interview after the ribbon cutting ceremony.

The new 20-bed unit on the fifth floor of the hospital’s South Tower will provide inpatient services to adults 19 and older who are affected by mental diseases such as schizophrenia, major depression and bipolar disorder.

It is the only unit of its kind in Shelby County, and will allow the county’s law enforcement to more easily get patients the help they need as quickly as possible, Fuhrmeister said.

“Before we had these beds here in Shelby County, we often had to wait days before we could get a bed,” Fuhrmeister said. “People who presented a real and present danger to themselves or others would remain in the community for days before we could get them the help they needed.”

Zelia Baugh, the former Alabama mental health commissioner, will serve as director of the facility, and said the unit will provide much-needed services to Shelby County’s growing population.

“People who have a mental illness don’t raise their hand in kindergarten and say ‘I want to have a mental disease.’ It’s a true disease,” Baugh said. “It’s an honor to be a part of this. This will help Shelby County and the surrounding counties so much.”

In addition to providing families of mentally ill adults easier access to services in the county, the new unit also will give the Shelby County Sheriff’s Office a new option in helping those with mental illnesses.

With a licensed psychiatric care unit now in Shelby County, the Sheriff’s Office will be able to name a deputy sheriff mental health officer position, said SCSO Capt. Chris George.

Currently, the Sheriff’s Office must work through the county’s probate court or the Chilton-Shelby Mental Health Center when dealing with a mentally ill adult who poses a danger to themselves or the community.

Once a county mental health officer is trained and appointed, they will be able to directly admit a patient to the psychiatric unit, possibly preventing the person from going to jail.

“They don’t need to be arrested if they legitimately have a psychiatric disease,” George said.

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